



01

TIES THAT BIND

Relationship building through Joint Combined Exchange Training in the Indo-Pacific Region.

BY CAPTAIN MICHAEL MANZANO

“China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific to their advantage. While some view China’s actions in the East and South China Seas as opportunistic, I do not. I view them as coordinated, methodical and strategic, using their military and economic power to erode the free and open international order.”

— Admiral Harry Harris, Former Commander,
U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, March 15, 2018

01

A Special Forces Soldier from 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) conducts small unit tactics training with Thai partner forces during a Joint Combined Exchange Training exercise in Thailand.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JASON C. GAMBARDELLA

For nearly half a century United States Army Special Forces units have conducted Joint Combined Exchange Training exercises with allied military forces across the globe. JCETs provide participating units with valuable opportunities to exchange military tactics, techniques and procedures, develop greater regional expertise and strengthen both professional and personal relationships in ways stateside combat training centers cannot replicate. In today’s complex, global environment the relationships U.S. Special Forces and their counterparts build during these JCETs are more important than ever. Our nation’s adversaries, most notably China, are actively working to expand their influence all over the world; threatening U.S. national security. The Indo-Pacific region has become the hub for this activity, resulting in a regional competition for partners and allies. 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) leads U.S efforts in this competition for allies by maximizing the benefits JCETs can provide. In the summer of 2018, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) executed a series of JCETs throughout the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating the vital role U.S. Special Forces units can play in ensuring the United States remains the partner of choice for countries in the region.

In October 2017, President Xi made his vision for China clear at China’s 19th Party Congress. China is to develop a world-class military and become the “global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence.”⁰² Former U.S. Secretary of Defense, James Mattis directly addressed the dangers this vision poses to the U.S. and the global community in the 2018 *U.S. National Defense Strategy*. The document declared China and Russia’s actions are creating a dangerous level of “inter-state strategic competition,” threatening the current international order. The threat is so severe, it overtakes terrorism as the “primary concern in U.S. national security.”⁰³ In outlining challenges the U.S. is currently facing, Mattis also pointed out potential solutions. The core of these solutions lies in our nation’s ability to build alliances to counter a global threat. “Our strength and integrated actions with allies,”⁰⁴ he continued, “will demonstrate our commitment to deterring aggression.” With extensive foreign language training and cultural expertise, U.S. Special Forces remains uniquely equipped to carry out those integrated actions with our nation’s allies.

The JCETs 2nd Bn., 1 SFG (A) executed demonstrated the full extent of Special Forces’ capabilities to combat the threat of Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific. JCETs in Mongolia, Thailand, and Malaysia showcased Special Forces’ cultural and language skill sets while providing U.S. Soldiers unparalleled training opportunities. On the grounds where Genghis Khan once launched a campaign that con-

quered more than half the world, U.S. and Mongolian Special Forces Soldiers spent a month training in the country's famous snow-covered steppes. While in the field, SF Operational Detachment – Alpha members and Mongolian Soldiers exchanged techniques in small unit tactics, survival skills and combat casualty care. In their sleeping quarters, Soldiers from both units shared their language, music, food and even watched the 2018 NBA finals together. Mongolia's strategic geographic location sandwiched between China and Russia makes it the center of a battle for influence between its neighboring countries and the United States. But Mongolia's foreign policy, driven by its desire to find a suitable "third neighbor" to balance China and Russia, has resulted in a significant increase in U.S. influence over the past several decades. U.S. Special Forces detachments have been at the forefront of that influence for years through JCET deployments. The result has been a persistent U.S. presence in the country built on personal relationships, mutual trust and shared security concerns over their geographic neighbors.

As Special Forces detachments traveled south from Mongolia to Malaysia and Thailand, the influence U.S. forces built in the region was clearly apparent. Senior ranking Commandos from the Malaysian Grup Gerak Khas spoke fondly of the relationships they built with American generals while conducting JCETs together many years prior. These Malaysian officers and NCOs, who now work to schedule JCETs, recounted their positive experiences and invited 1st SFG (A) units back to their country to conduct marksmanship training, multi-language mission planning and airborne operations with the next generation of GGK Soldiers. The same was true in Thailand, where decades of partnership between Thai and U.S. forces resulted in invaluable region specific jungle and pack animal training for U.S. Soldiers. The shared hardships in training and eagerness for U.S. Soldiers to speak to partners forces in their native language enhanced our capabilities and built trust with grateful allies. As a result, the relationships both units' commanders started on JCETs many years ago persists today.

Every SFOD-A in Co. C returned to the United States with the same message from their partner force: 'Come back and let's continue to build these friendships.' The countries recognize that our partnerships are not transactional exchanges between two governments but rather deeply personal relationships, rooted in shared hardships and demonstrated commitment to one another's interests. As China continues to build their military and encroaches on countries in the region, U.S. Special Forces Soldiers are sharing tents with the future military and political leaders of Mongolia, Thailand and Malaysia. Leaders who will one day become defense ministers, generals and political

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representatives. These leaders will craft foreign policy and determine which nations will provide them the most benefit as partners. There is no doubt our nation's persistent involvement in these countries through the JCET program helps retain our partnerships. The value in conducting JCETs in the Indo-Pacific region extends far beyond the immediate tactical benefits. They demonstrate our commitment to the region while simultaneously countering China's own efforts to do the same.

China will not stop its quest to become a global leader in military strength and international influence. In an address to the Senate Armed Forces Committee Admiral Harris acutely pointed out that what began in the Indo-Pacific is rapidly expanding into Central Asia, the Arctic, Africa, South America and Europe.⁰¹ The U.S. knows it cannot prevent China from working towards President Xi's vision. But what the United States can continue to do is develop meaningful relationships with our allies and partners through JCETs and similar unit exchanges. The military, and Special Forces in particular, remains a crucial element of national power that can be employed to counter China's global influence. 1st SFG (A) understands that a JCET's value extends far beyond a unit's enhanced tactical capabilities and improved foreign language proficiency. Today, as a result of JCETs, Commandos in Mongolia, Malaysia, Thailand and so many other countries look at the U.S. and see more than a flag, new equipment or potential monetary investment. They see partners and friends who will stand by their side as they climb steep terrain in the snow; patrol jungles in the brutal summer heat; and swim for miles in oceans with heavy equipment. There is a reason why every country 2/1 SFG (A) traveled to in the summer of 2018 requested future engagements. A half century of JCETs has demonstrated to our allies the value we bring to their countries and the sincerity of our partnerships. Now, more than ever, these partnerships remain vital for our country's ability to maintain influence in a region China seeks to dominate. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES **01.** Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Opening Statement, ADM Harry Harris | U.S. Indo-Pacific Command | March 20, 2018. **02.** i*Ibid.* **03.** 2018 United States National Defense Strategy, page 1. **04.** 2018 United States National Defense Strategy, page 5. **05.** i*Ibid.*, 01.